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THE IDEA OF A MODERN ORTHODOXY

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Systematic theology is, and of right ought to be, primarily practical. In the first place, true religion is both one of the ends of an ideal human life and, in the long run, an indispensable means to the morality which is most essential to human welfare, inner and outer. In the second place, theology is necessary as an instrument for the proper control of the development and expression of religion—a special case of the function of ideas in the control of life. It follows, therefore, that a sound theology is a human necessity. The purpose of the theologian, whatever else it may or must include, must be to find those religious truths which are essential to the vitality and efficiency of the best type of human religion.

That this has really been the aim of theologians in the great formative periods of the history of Christian doctrine may readily be shown. The prevailing impression with regard to orthodoxy and excluded heresies is that the distinction between them is arbitrary and external. This is indeed to the modern mind true in large measure of the distinction between the old orthodoxy and heresy; but in their own day this distinction was neither arbitrary nor external. Then it was organically related to the most pressing of problems; it was supremely vital, for the issues involved were nothing short of spiritual life and death.

Examine, for instance, the theology of that pillar of Greek Christian orthodoxy, Athanasius. The religious interest of the day centred in the question of immortality. Athanasius, as the spokesman of orthodoxy, was supremely concerned to conserve the assurance of a blessed immortality. Man, as such, according to the presuppositions of the Greek mind, was essentially corruptible and mortal. Only the divine was incorruptible, immortal. For corruptible, mortal human nature to put on incorruption and

immortality, it must become partaker of the divine nature throughout; it must participate in the very substance of the eternally perfect God himself. If, then, Christianity was to be a veritable gospel to the Greek mind, it was essential to maintain that in Christ humanity was permeated through and through with the very being and essence of God. This is the key to the Nicene formulation, with its insistent repetition, "the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father." As Athanasius explains, "Mankind is perfected in Him and restored, as it was made at the beginning, nay, with greater grace. For, on rising from the dead, we shall no longer fear death, but shall ever reign in Christ in the heavens. And this has been done, since the own Word of God Himself, who is from the Father, has put on the flesh and become man. For if, being a creature, he had become man, man had remained just what he was, not joined to God. . . . For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless he had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body. . . . Therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is in man by nature to him who is in the nature of the God-head, and his salvation and deification might be sure." (*Orationes contra Arianos*, ii, 67, 70.) The one fatal defect of practically all the heresies rejected by the orthodox Greek Christians was their failure to conserve in thought the one supremely important religious value—the gospel of eternal life.

It was not otherwise with the theological thought of Western Christendom in its earlier formative period. Here the *Cur Deus Homo* is perhaps our most striking example. Anselm's object in this epoch-making treatise was to show, not by means of the substance-philosophy of the Greeks, but by means of those juridical ideas which were vital in the experience of his contemporaries, that it was impossible for man "to enjoy a happy immortality . . . unless God became man, and unless all things were to take place which we hold with regard to Christ." From the point of view of the Western mediaeval mind with its Romanized conceptions, it was indispensable for the complete satisfaction of

God's honor in view of man's infinite sin, that there be either the suffering of finite man for an infinitely long period or the suffering of an infinite being, God as well as man, for a finite period. Thus the only alternative to everlasting damnation for every sinner was to be found in the reality of the vicarious, penal suffering of him who was God and man in one person. Here again the decisive consideration leading to the selection of the belief in "God in Christ" as orthodox, in opposition to all deviating positions as heretical, was the interest in the conservation of indispensable religious values. If there was to be blessedness, eternal life, for man, the substitutionary punishment of the God-man seemed indispensable; and so long as the older presuppositions existed, all deviations from this position were inevitably dreaded by Protestant and Catholic alike as damnable heresies.

But this suggests a special reason why theological construction is important in the present situation. The old orthodoxies were true hypothetically. That is, if salvation, blessedness, eternal life, is possible only on the conditions presupposed by ancient or mediaeval thought, then the central elements of those orthodoxies must be maintained, for Christian faith must hold that salvation is possible. But the fact is that the older presuppositions are not those of the modern mind. We no longer adhere to the metaphysical presuppositions of the ancient Greek church, nor to the external legalism of the mediaeval churches, Roman and Protestant. Advances in scientific knowledge have caused changes in the views, not simply of the technical philosopher, but of the average man of today. Changes in human interests and activities also, partly caused by new knowledge, partly otherwise, have produced their characteristic changes in thought, so that religion is in a radically altered situation in the modern world. It is no longer necessary for us to believe the old orthodoxies upon the old grounds; and so the question arises, Is it necessary to believe them at all, and if so, why? The former orthodoxies were good, but they seem to have grown stale. They successfully met situations which no longer exist.

What is obviously suggested by these facts is the idea of a modern orthodoxy, a formulation of the doctrines necessary and effective for the conservation of the faith which will meet the

vital religious needs of the modern man.¹ This does not mean a return to traditionalism and the appeal to an external authority. That is no longer possible for the emancipated intellect. If we accept Professor William Adams Brown's recent definition of the new theology, in his article entitled "The Old Theology and the New,"² as "the theology whose method is determined by the results of modern scientific movement, both on the objective side in the acceptance of development as the law of the physical universe, and on the subjective side by the recognition of the contribution which the mind itself makes to the content of its own knowledge," we are fast approaching a state of affairs where all must be new theologians. The autonomy of the thinking subject must be as fully respected in theology as in mathematics and physics.

But neither does the idea of a modern orthodoxy imply the setting up of a new traditionalism which shall bind the minds and consciences of future Christians to those formulations which express our independent convictions. Never again must there be placed about the neck of religion the millstone of dogmas enforced by external authority. Although there is still need of a greater confidence in the dependableness of the spirit of man at its best, freedom in religion is being rapidly realized, and will undoubtedly be a permanent achievement of humanity. Henceforth the great religious problem is not freedom but truth.

Not a reversion, then, to traditionalism and the orthodoxy of the past, just because it was the orthodoxy of that day, nor yet the establishing of a new traditionalism for the future, is what is meant by a modern orthodoxy, but, with frank acceptance of the modern situation and the liberal concession to others of the freedom we demand for ourselves, we mean the intelligent conservation, by means of theological construction, of the religious values which are vital today. Professor Brown, in the article referred to, says that the questions at issue between the various

¹ It will be readily understood that what is here suggested is something very different in idea from the "modern orthodox" movement in Germany, as represented by such writers as Theodor Kaftan, Seeberg, Stange, Dunkmann, and Grützmacher. That is essentially an attempt to convince the modern mind of the truth of the ancient and mediaeval orthodoxy.

² Harvard Theological Review, January, 1911.

representatives of the new theology are only differences of detail, and that, as compared with the issues which separate the new theology from the old, they are secondary and may be overlooked. The ties that bind together the various types of new theology are, as Professor Brown asserts, primarily intellectual. And it is this fact, as it seems to me, that constitutes at once the strength and the weakness of the newer movement as a whole. Because of the greater intellectual defensibility of the new, it will undoubtedly succeed in displacing the old. But will it minister to the needs of the modern man better than, or as well as, the older orthodoxy ministered to the demands of the religious spirit of its own day? This is the crucial question. Deeper even than the line of cleavage between the old theology and the new is the dividing line between the modern theology which is conservative of vital Christian faith and that whose only asset is its liberalism. There is a closer and more vital bond of union between Christians who, whether of the old theological persuasion or the new, are supremely interested in the christianization of the world, than there is between those whose sole bond of sympathy is antagonism to traditionalism in religious belief. The new theology, viewed in the large, is full of heresies; besides much that is sound and vital, it contains much that is destructive not simply of the orthodoxy of the past—that is a comparatively light matter and even in some respects a cause for congratulation—but it contains also much that is incompatible with a *modern* orthodoxy, a theology which shall conserve the genuine and essential religious values of the present.

If we attempt to apply this idea of a free but discriminating modern orthodoxy, the preliminary question arises, What are the essential religious interests of today? In brief, man is still in need of religious peace combined with moral power. Perhaps the modern emphasis is upon the need of power, whereas the former insistence was upon the necessity of peace; but religious assurance is still indispensable, not only as an end in itself, but as a means to the highest degree of spiritual power. While continuing, then, to emphasize the ideas that strengthen the sense of responsibility and the demand for spiritual power, we need to achieve anew in the modern world the Christocentric faith that

the supreme power in the universe has been revealed to us in the character of Jesus Christ and in his attitude toward men. To conserve in the serious worker for individual and social regeneration a joyous confidence in the saving love of God, in so far as this can be done by a system of thought, is the task for which a modern orthodoxy is demanded.

How, then, is this ethico-religious faith to be conserved in the life of the modern man? Not by a simple return to the standards of the past, for, while much can be learned from a discriminating study of the way in which doctrine ministered to life in the past, it must be remembered that what was heretical and injurious to faith, when taught in connection with certain presuppositions formerly held, has in some instances come to be integrated into the very essentials of vital Christian faith. As an example one has only to cite the ancient heresy of patripassianism reappearing in the vital Christian doctrine that human sin causes suffering to God the Father, who, because of his love, is the great vicarious Sin-bearer for the salvation of the world. Moreover, on the other hand, much of the old orthodoxy is, in the modern situation, not so much heretical as irrelevant; it is not a live hypothesis. What is needed today is that the minister as theologian shall take account of the ways in which the interests of present-day Christian faith are being threatened by various tendencies of contemporary thought, and that he learn how these modern heresies may be eliminated from the new theology.

The chief heresies of the new theology may be grouped, I believe, into two main classes, the ultra-monistic heresies and the ultra-pluralistic heresies. The heresies of an ultra-monistic point of view were typically and somewhat sensationally set forth by R. J. Campbell in his much-discussed book, *The New Theology*. Some rationalistic monists deviate still further from the essentials of an ethico-religious faith in the direction of an all-engulfing Brahministic pantheism, while others do not go so far; but any view which merges man in a deterministic Absolute so as to threaten his responsible freedom; any view which tends to explain away moral evil as merely negative, as entirely due to mere immaturity, the absence of being, or to mere ignorance, the absence of knowing; or to explain it as a necessary means to good,

and therefore itself in reality good—any such view is plainly too inimical to moral values to have place in the faith of Christianity as the truly ethical religion, and is therefore to be rejected as a dangerous and destructive heresy. And indeed it is not simply as not moral enough that ultra-monism is to be rejected; it is defective religiously as well. If from the absolute point of view the validity of the distinction between moral good and evil is overcome, what we as moral beings must call moral evil is to be taken as a revelation of God, as well as what we must call moral good. All reality, as having its place in a rational and orderly system, is regarded as equally divine; or, if any degrees of revelation are recognized, the criterion of the divine is held to be intellectual power and clearness of ideas, rather than that highest good, the good will. What warrant then is there that our highest human values, including morality, will be conserved by a God or Absolute of whom morality cannot be predicated?

Ultra-monistic heresies, then, are objectionable primarily on the moral grounds that they depotentiate man and belie morality, and ultimately on religious grounds as well, as giving no satisfying view of God. Ultra-pluralistic heresies, on the other hand, are to be rejected primarily on the religious grounds that they depotentiate God and tend to make religion impossible or futile. A thorough-going pluralism which holds that reality is and always has been composed of a collection of absolutely independent individuals, is so irreligious as to be practically atheistic, and in the case of McTaggart of the University of Cambridge the atheism is explicitly avowed. But it makes little difference religiously whether or not the pluralist asserts that one of the non-interacting individuals is God; this isolated pluralistic God cannot act on the lives of other individuals, nor, according to thorough-going statements of the theory, upon the world or anything but the contents of his own inner life. Whether there is such a God or not, it is to man as if there were none; such a God can do nothing for him

A less extreme but still objectionable pluralism is that which has gained considerable currency through the philosophical writings of the late Professor William James and some others. This theory does not deny the possibility of God's acting upon

or within the life of man, but it restricts the divine presence and activity to those comparatively rare and more or less highly abnormal experiences that seem to be limited, practically, to people of highly emotional and "mystical" temperament,³ and which it is now the fashion to interpret as due to the emergence above the threshold of consciousness of activities originating in a supposedly more or less psychical subconscious department of life. A recent noteworthy development of this theory is to be found in Professor Sanday's *Christologies Ancient and Modern*, where he uses this conception of the relation of God to man in his interpretation of the real divinity and real humanity of Christ. The religious weakness of this view is partially admitted by Professor James when he says, "That the God with whom, starting from the hither side of our own extra-marginal self, we come at its remoter margin into commerce should be the absolute world-ruler, is of course a very considerable over-belief."⁴ But more than that, such a God—not to dwell upon the acknowledged possibility that it may be gods, rather than God—such a God is necessarily absent from much and indeed by far the most of what is of greatest value in human life and experience. What is qualitatively most like our ideal of the divine has, for the most part, nothing whatever to do with the real God. The true, the beautiful, and the good in human life would become the only worthy object of human worship, and God himself be almost negligible. In no comprehensive sense could he be said to be Saviour of the world. In all but a comparatively small fraction of his life, man would be necessarily irreligious, if indeed any one could be really religious at first hand,—except one who happened to have a consciousness with what Professor James calls a "leaky margin," or unusual openness of the "subliminal door," one who is at least liable to have trances and various sorts of sensory and motor automatisms. Is that faith completely

³ When the mystic interprets all reality from the point of view gained within the mystical experience in its more extreme forms, the result is an extreme monism in which the individuality of man is merged in that of God; when he interprets life and reality from the ordinary non-mystical point of view of common sense while attaching religious value to the mystical experience alone, a somewhat too pluralistic world-view is the result.

⁴ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 518.

Christian which is satisfied to say that it is not in God, but in occasional subconscious touch with him, that we live and move and have our being? One may be forgiven, surely, for refusing to believe, as a recent writer has put it—rather too strongly perhaps, but still strikingly—“that the feet of the supernatural deliberately choose to tread the slime of the subliminal . . . while avoiding the sunlit hills of full rational consciousness.”⁵

It would seem then that the modern theologian is between Scylla and Charybdis. How may he avoid both of these opposite dangers,—on the one hand that of being ensnared by the devil of ultra-pluralism, and on the other hand that of being engulfed in the deep sea of ultra-monism? Or, positively, how is he to conserve for the modern mind the essentials of a vital ethico-religious faith? Truly, it is no insignificant service that is demanded of the constructive theologian of today. He must do for himself and for his generation what Athanasius and Anselm and others like them did for their earlier days; he must find or frame an orthodoxy for the times. Is there any theologian or any school of theologians whose members are successfully addressing themselves to this task?

It may not be invidious, perhaps, to express the opinion that among all the various schools and tendencies of modern theological thought, the Ritschlian theology is most deserving of attention in this regard. It has serious shortcomings, indeed, but it starts well and is doubtless upon the right track. It is pre-eminently a Christocentric theology. It finds its normative revelation of God in the person and work of Christ as the founder of the kingdom of God among men; Christianity is the religion of the Christ-like God. All that is involved in this Christocentric principle must have place in one's theology, as belonging to the essentials of Christian faith; all that contradicts it, as, for example, certain features of extreme monism and extreme pluralism, must be rejected as heretical; all that is neutral may be left as irrelevant or at least comparatively unimportant. Theology, it is maintained, must be religious, and not speculative; ethical, and not mystical; evangelically Christian, and not syncretistic.

⁵ F. M. Davenport, *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals*, p. 280.

In these propositions lie the strength of Ritschlianism, and at the same time its weakness. On the one hand they guarantee that no content will be admitted into the theology which would destroy its vital essence, namely, faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has revealed himself for our moral redemption. This vital content would be imperilled if the results of metaphysical speculation, or of suggestion in mystical experience, or of the comparative study of religions were uncritically admitted to a place in our theology. But on the other hand the content of a permanently Christocentric theology might be further developed by the fructifying influence of the speculations of the philosopher, the suggestions and inner assurances of the mystic, and the discoveries of the student of other religions. And, what is more important still, to tell the Christian thinker that he must not use the content of his Christian faith as an hypothesis in metaphysical speculation, nor seek to reassure himself of the truth of his faith in the immediacy of religious feeling, nor submit his religion to the test of the survival of the fittest in competition with the great faiths of the world, is to imperil Christian certainty, and thus in the end to endanger the content of our faith itself; for it encourages the doubt that perhaps the Christocentric faith is not capable of meeting these varied tests of thought and feeling and action. Surely our Christian faith is made of sterner stuff than this timidity of the Ritschlians would suggest.

The fact is, Ritschlianism has the primary qualifications for being the orthodoxy of the modern man, but it greatly needs to be supplemented. One of the criticisms commonly directed against it is that its judgments are subjective evaluations with no sufficient guarantee of their objective validity, as, for example, in the case of the divinity of Christ, where it is claimed that the Ritschlian doctrine may be interpreted as meaning that if Christ is felt to have divine value for our experience, he is divine; if not, he is not divine. It is commonly held that greater explicitness is desirable with reference to the divinity of Christ, perhaps largely because of the central place which that doctrine has had in the orthodoxy of the past. It is claimed that an "ethical" divinity is not enough; in other words, it is not enough to say that the moral quality of Jesus' life is good enough to be called

divine, nor even to say that he was the man who did the divine work of bringing salvation to the human race. There must be predicated, it is declared, an essential or metaphysical divinity, such as has always been held among the orthodox Christians. But according to the idea of a modern orthodoxy, if an essential divinity of Christ is to be asserted, it must be because the genuine religious needs of the time demand it, not because it has been believed in the past. That there is in reality a present religious need for the doctrine of the essential divinity of Christ is best shown by turning from christology to theology proper. The other side of the doctrine of the "ethical" divinity of Christ is the Christocentric doctrine of God; or, in other words, if Christ is like God, then God is like Christ. But if we are entitled to say that God is like Christ, we must and may go farther. If God is really like Christ, he must, like Christ, be actually doing what the Christ-like spirit everywhere must do; that is, he must be not simply providing for humanity in an external way, but working for the salvation, the moral redemption, of humanity as effectively as it is possible for God to do. Now if this means anything at all, if God is not merely a good-natured being who wishes us well, but can do nothing for us, it means that the saving effect of Christ's work in human history is, in the full sense of the word, God's doing. Thus we conclude that God is not merely *like* Christ; God was *in* Christ, reconciling the world to himself, and thereby redeeming, regenerating, and progressively perfecting the sons of men. But if God was in Christ, by parity of reasoning we must conclude that God was and is in the Christ-like everywhere; and here we come upon the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, or the christianized form of the doctrine of the immanence of God, as opposed to the distinctionless immanence of pantheism and its monistic relatives. And this doctrine of degrees of the actual immanence of God, varying according to the measure of likeness to the spirit of Christ, while it is the needed supplement to Ritschlianism and thus fills out the outline of a modern orthodoxy, at the same time leads one over naturally and necessarily into the field of metaphysics. These essential principles of modern orthodoxy have a right to be taken as working hypotheses in metaphysics and elaborated and tested in the

light of all relevant knowledge. And in the end this will doubtless mean at least as valuable a service of religion to philosophy as of philosophy to religion, for it is high time for metaphysics to recognize that the question of monism and pluralism is first of all a religious question and only secondly and secondarily a question of philosophy.

This task of finding, elaborating, and defending a modern orthodoxy is not an affair of the professional theologian alone; it is the business of the minister, and indeed of the whole religious community. The theologian doubtless has as much to learn from his brethren in the active ministry as he has to teach any of them, just as the true minister can always learn as much from his people as they have to learn from him. It is a case of the mutual service of reflection and experience. The theologian and the minister as a student of theology must study systems of thought, but even more imperative is the need to study religious life, to interrogate persistently and with due discrimination the human heart in its necessities and in its assurances, for in the end, when the transition to a modern position has become general, it is the Christian consciousness at its deepest and best that must pass final judgment as to what shall constitute the orthodoxy of the modern man.